
Cultural Constructions of Gender

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century a considerable amount of ethnographic data regarding cultural variations in concepts of sex and gender were collected. The data included a variety of casual mentions, some detailed case-oriented studies, and compilations of data. However, most of these were cast within an ethnocentric paradigm focused on psychosocial anomalies or presumed pathologies. The major exception was the collection by Ford and Beach (1951) dealing with variations in human sexual behavior, looking to develop a sense of patterning. A little more than 20 years later, Martin and Voorhies (1975) coined the term “supernumerary sexes” in an effort to make sense out of the data that then existed. They meant this term to refer to cultural categories that did not fit the Western European and North American bipolar paradigms.

Although a great deal of ethnographic data regarding cultural variations in conceptualizing sex and gender had been collected throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, it was not until the mid-1970s that the degree of patterning and variability was recognized as an ordinary part of the range of human behavior. It is not as easy to pinpoint the earliest use of “gender” as a part of the social science vocabulary regarding human sexuality.

At this point in time, three terms have come into common use: sex, gender, and sexuality. There are a variety of definitions of each, so, in order to provide a common ground for readers, this article uses the following conceptualizations. “Sex” is taken to refer primarily to biological characteristics. In that sense human beings everywhere have only two sexes, except for a few rarely occurring genetic or hormonal anomalies, a few of which are clearly understood, a few of whom are not. However, every culture also contains a set of norms describing the “proper” use of sexual physiology. For example, who constitute appropriate sexual partners, when sexual activity should take place, or what sorts of clothing are sexually provocative and which are not. From this point of view we can talk of both biological sex and cultural, or

culturally mediated, sex. “Gender” is taken to refer to a culturally based complex of norms, values, and behaviors that a particular culture assigns to one biological sex or another. Where sex and gender are lodged largely in the matrix of a culture’s norms, values, and beliefs, “sexuality” is taken here as referring to a more individualized concept. Sexuality is used here to refer to the ways in which individuals structure their sexual and gender performances, and the partners toward whom they direct their behavior and emotional attachments. As Lorber (1994) notes, these are not really completely separate and we are better off thinking in terms of a sex–gender–sexuality system.

INTERSEXUALITY

Human biology is everywhere the same, and follows the basic mammalian sexual pattern. There are, of course, a variety of genetic and hormonal anomalies which occasionally occur. Examination of the ways in which different cultures deal with these helps make the case for understanding gender, and, to some extent, cultural sex, as culturally constructed in ways that are not dependent on biological realities. One anomaly, the birth of a child with external genitalia that are not clearly male or female, usually referred to as intersexuality, illustrates that the variation is along the lines of social and cultural location.

The Pokot, living in Kenya, respond to intersexed individuals as an extremely unfortunate occurrence, and frequently resort to infanticide (Edgerton, 1964). The Navajo classify such individuals as belonging to a third category that is neither masculine nor feminine (Hill, 1935). Most segments of middle class U.S. culture tend to see such people as “mistakes of nature” and seek to correct the “error.” For the Pokot, there is no cultural place for those they call *sererr*, and those few who survive live on the margins of the society. U.S. cultures also have no place for intersexed individuals, but try to fit them into one of the two normatively accepted categories.

Although both the middle-class United States and the Pokot can be said to have a bipolar view of sex and gender, the conceptualizations are still very different. For the Pokot, only those with the normatively appropriate morphological structures can be transformed into gendered children. For the United States, a surgical transformation renders biologically anomalous individuals fit for the social and cultural transformation that will occur. Ultimately, in every culture there is a process by which genderless neonates are transformed into gendered children (or adults-in-training).

Recently, at least in North America and Western Europe, people who see themselves as transsexual or transgendered have been agitating for an end to the assumption that biologically intersexed people suffer from a malady. They have also urged an end to automatic consideration of sex reassignment surgery. Their vision is of North American macroculture as it might be. However, it is still the case that the most frequent occurrence is to view children born with ambiguous genital structures as needing treatment so that they can fit into one of the two culturally accepted poles.

BIPOLAR CONSTRUCTS

The cultural worlds of North America and Western Europe organize their varied understandings of sex–gender–sexuality systems around a set of intersecting dichotomous pairs: masculine–feminine and homosexual (forbidden)–heterosexual (permitted). This paradigm then constrains and directs understandings of sexual behavior, sexualized behavior, and their association with nonsexual aspects of social and cultural life. When preadolescent North American boys avoid some activities or modes of behavior because they are said to be “girlish,” or when preadolescent girls are harassed for engaging in activities said to be “boyish,” we are witnessing something more than socialization for a culture’s sexual division of labor.

In most of this culture area division of labor is not strongly marked in detail, but it is strongly marked in terms of the diffusely defined general categories of public and private or household and outside. To the extent that the household domain is defined as feminine space and is also associated with motherhood, childcare, and wife roles, it becomes partially sexualized. The result is a cultural constraint on the breadth of role and status variation open to men. Men who are good household

managers and involved parents are often thought of as disturbingly feminine. Similarly, to the extent that the “outside” is defined as masculine space and is also associated with excelling in nonhousehold tasks and with husband and economic support roles, it too becomes partially sexualized, resulting in constraints on the breadth of role and status variation open to women. Women who are good income earners or highly trained professionals are frequently seen as disturbingly masculine.

To be sure, there are cultures outside the boundaries of the Western world that are also traditionally organized around a variation on the bipolar theme. It is also the case that every culture makes some distinction between the positions of women and men. The important point here is the Western association of role transcendence with flawed and improper sexuality.

VARIATION IN GENDER CONSTRUCTS

The accumulation of ethnographic data indicates that some cultures have developed gender paradigms going beyond the Western conceptualization of two gender poles. The existence of more than two gender poles does not mean that both people with the morphological characteristics of men and those with the morphological characteristics of women necessarily have available more than one gender pole. Many multipolar cultures deal with morphological men and morphological women differently. The general case is that morphological men are more likely to be seen as possibly fitting into more than one named institutionalized position with a distinct gender construction, and that morphological women are more likely to be seen as falling along a continuum of variations, all of which are considered womanly and feminine.

The classic instance is the difference between the manly hearted women among the Mandan and other Plains Indians and the *berdache*, or two spirit people, also on the North American plains (Williams, 1992). While morphological men might, as the result of a vision quest or other spirit visitation, occupy the separate *berdache* social position, manly hearted women were still women, and sometimes valued even more highly than “ordinary” women. At least in this instance, morphological women did not cease being sociological women, while morphological men might cease being sociological men.

At the same time, it is also important to note that some cultures (e.g., the Mohave in North America and the

Chuckchee in Siberia) did have parallel institutional structures for women and men. Similarly, in a few North American Plains cultures, some women did, on their own initiative, assume roles comparable to male *berdache*. On a cross-cultural level, it was most often the case that female gender variations were individualized and male variations were institutionalized.

In general, gender, as constructed in particular cultures, consists of both signifying elements and performance elements. A person assumes the signifying elements (e.g., clothing or hair style) and exhibits the performance elements. While biological sex is something a person has, regardless of behavior, gender is seen only when it is performed or signaled.

The existing ethnographic literature documents four different forms of gender variation.

1. Some societies construct gender so as to contain distinct categories that are neither masculine nor feminine.
2. Some societies construct gender in ways that are bipolar, but in which the boundaries are markedly different from those common in Western Europe and North America.
3. Some societies construct gender so that, while the basic pattern is bipolar, people with one set of biological characteristics are able, under specific circumstances, to step outside of the society's ordinary construct and enter the other construct.
4. A residual category—instances that do not quite fit our neatly created typology. This category is necessary to highlight the purely heuristic nature of the other three and to avoid sterile typological debates and arguments.

In all instances, there is an initial transformation from genderless to gendered. But in two of these there is a distinct transformational process that takes place after the initial one has begun. For example, although physiologically intersexed individuals are recognizable at birth, and the Navajo place them in a third category, *nadle*, the Navajo also recognize a group of people they call “those who pretend to be (or play the part of) *nadle*” (Hill, 1935). These individuals come to their status after having begun socialization as masculine or feminine.

Neither Masculine nor Feminine

Here we can place the *berdache* as found in some cultures on the North American Plains. The term *berdache* has a history reflecting its Eurocentric origins and the ethnocentrism of most 17th, 18th, and 19th century European and European American observers of Native American cultures. The term “two spirit” is assuming greater

currency among Native Americans. Two spirit comes closer to reflecting cultural realities than does *berdache*.

In all the ethnographic instances cited by Williams (1992), a young, usually preadolescent, boy would set out on a vision quest, seeking a relationship with a spirit being who would then help him determine and strive for his future life. Once he had the vision, he would return to his group and someone skilled in such matters would interpret his vision for him. For some, their vision was interpreted as indicating the two-spirit status. In the traditional world of late 19th century Plains life, they would then wear women's clothes and engage in the daily activities of ordinary women. But they also had unique roles in instances of weddings, childbirth, child naming, and warfare.

In the contemporary world, the situation is rather different. By the late 20th century, the position of the *berdache* had been heavily overlaid with Western sex–gender–sexuality constructs. One Lakota *berdache* describing his position (Bradley & Phillips, 1991) wears contemporary men's clothing rather than the traditional women's clothing. He also speaks to the contemporary rarity of *berdache*, implies an absence of clearly defined role, and does not mention any sort of vision quest. Although to some extent these changes are illustrative of the effects of westernization, they are also a testament to the resilience of traditional patterns in the face of disvaluing culturally foreign pressures. *Berdache* were, and apparently still are, seen as neither men nor women, or possibly sociologically both. The two-spirit designation reflects the first spirit of the child's birth as well as the second spirit of the child's vision, or other contemporary realization about who he is.

There are other instances of cultures containing sex–gender–sexuality categories that do not fit within the constraints of bipolar paradigms, and many of them also do not fit the two-spirit model. At the time of writing, no clear count has yet been done. However, as will be seen below, the categories created by a particular culture under particular sociocultural conditions are not necessarily fixed and unchangeable. A rough sense of the magnitude of variations may be possible, but not a definitive count.

Nonwestern Bipolar Constructs

Among the classic instances of cultures whose sex–gender–sexuality systems are bipolar, but do not fit Western models of such organization, are those documented more than 70 years ago by Margaret Mead (1950).

In those instances, Mead was most concerned with aspects of behavior other than the sexual, and in that very concern was able to document the ways in which gender was separately constructed and not necessarily causally tied to biological sex. Each of the three cultures she describes assigns a different emotional-behavioral complex to women and to men. Some of those complexes mirror Western constructs and some do not.

Since all cultures contain at least masculine and feminine categories, it is probably also the case that none of those definitions completely matches contemporary Western categories. For example, Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania, or Wodaabi Fulani in the Sahel, are peoples with bipolar gender constructs. But when it comes to cultural definitions of masculine dress, jewelry, or decoration, they are very different from the business suit, wrist watch, and ring model of the Western world.

Transcendent Gender

The peoples falling into this category pose significant theoretical questions about the strength of cultural linkages between gender constructs and biological sex. Smith Oboler's (1980) description of marriage between two women among the Nandi explicitly explores this ground (see also the chapter on the Nandi in this encyclopedia). Her conclusion is that some aspects of male behavior and privileges are lightly tied to concepts of masculinity, so that it is possible for a woman to become husband to another woman, and in so doing be able to own land and other masculine property, as well as found her own patrilineage. Unfortunately, she provides no direct material regarding sexuality.

Similarly, among some groups of Igbo (Amadiume, 1987) it is possible for a woman to engage in a variety of behaviors, including marrying another woman or taking a male position in some rituals or legal proceedings, and not lose her sociological position as a woman. In all of these cases, the dominant factor is that women in a bipolar culture are able to transcend the normative boundaries of womanhood, and in so doing gain prestige and privilege in the society but do not lose a culturally defined essential femininity.

Other Conceptions

The Chuckchee of northern Siberia, as they were at the beginning of the 20th century (Bogoras, 1909), represent

one documented instance in which the potential for gender change is restricted to a small segment of the population. In this particular case the option was available only to those who found themselves thrust into the role of shaman. Chuckchee shamans are largely healers, and usually come to that position through recovery from a serious illness. Shamans can be either women or men, and on their recovery acquire a spouse in the world of spirits (*kelet*). Occasionally, the *kelet* spouse for a female shaman will be female, or for a male shaman, male. Under these circumstances, the Chuckchee claimed that the shaman had begun a process of changing sex that would culminate in an actual change in external genitalia. The shaman's human spouses would mirror the *kelet* spouse's gender. By the 1960s, the process of sovietization seems to have been thorough enough to wipe out shamanism. Levin and Potapov's (1964) discussion of the peoples of Siberia makes no mention of shamanism among any of them. The possible resurgence of the institution since the collapse of the Soviet Union is unknown.

Transformations

The Chuckchee represent an instance in which some sort of gender transformation is said to occur. Generally, we can think in terms of three axes of post-childhood gender transformation. One is of a temporary sort: a person takes on different gender characteristics for a short period of time, and then returns to the initial gender stance. The most common example of this phenomenon is the practice referred to by the term *couvade*. Most commonly found among peoples in the Amazon basin (Gregor, 1985), the *couvade* is also found in Melanesia (Blackwood, 1935; Meigs, 1976). In general, during some portion, or all, of his spouse's pregnancy and childbirth, a man takes on some aspects of the woman's behavioral complex. This may range from observing the same food regulations to taking to his bed and experiencing the pains of childbirth, or observing restrictions on sexual activity. Sometimes, the *couvade* lasts until the child is weaned.

This particular institution has been thoroughly researched, and a variety of psychogenic or sociogenic hypotheses have been tested (Munroe, Munroe, & Whiting, 1981, pp. 611-632). Those hypotheses revolving around cultural establishment of a secure masculine identity have been most convincingly supported. The interesting aspect of that explanation here is that in

societies practicing *couvade*, secure masculine identity is anchored by a temporary gender transformation.

Not quite as common, but hardly rare, are various forms of gender transgression. Murray (2000), Bullough (1976), and many other writers have noted that rituals of license, such as carnival or Mardi Gras, or rituals of rebellion (cf. Gluckman, 1956) often provide room for transgressing sexual and gender norms. Murray is one of several writers who see this as an acceptance of homosexuality but, as Gluckman points out, it can be just the opposite, in that the rituals permit, for a brief time, that which is generally forbidden. Regardless, a person engaging in a ritual of this sort does seem to temporarily change gender. The same can be said of female impersonators, whether in Shakespeare's plays, the film *Victor Victoria*, or a contemporary stage act.

A second form of gender transformation is relatively rare. In the course of an ordinary life cycle a person moves from one gender status to another. Among the Gabra in Kenya and Ethiopia, men, as they age, pass through a period in which they are said to be women (Wood, 1996, 1999). In a slightly different vein, Turnbull (1986) argues that the Mbuti in the Ituri Rainforest region of the Democratic Republic of Congo are genderless until they marry; that is, they pass through childhood without a distinct gender identity and are transformed only later.

The third form of gender transformation is a more or less permanent second transformation. Wikan (1977, 1982) indicates that those whom she calls *xanith* sometimes choose to become *xanith* and then later choose to stop being *xanith*. A similar phenomenon has also been reported for people in the Society Islands (Elliston, 1999). This third form is the abstract category, containing examples from every continent, of people fitting particular gender statuses unknown in the gender constructions of Western cultures. This is also the category containing instances such as shamans among the Chuckchee, who may undergo a transformation from male to female or female to male (Bogoras, 1909), as well as those being referred to when people talk of a "third gender."

In the world at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, globalization, and its concomitant spread of Western European and North American economic, political, and cultural hegemony, has led, in some areas, to adoption of new sex–gender–sexuality paradigms. Donham (1998), in his discussion of African male sexuality in the Republic of South Africa, notes the prevalence of cross-dressing and cross-role-taking behavior

among those who define themselves as gay. He also notes the general perception that gay men were not seen as either women or men, but as occupying a position in between—a "third sex."

Donham is describing aspects of South African sex–gender–sexuality systems in the early 1990s. He notes that at that time "gay" was not the commonly used term. Rather, the commonly used term was *stabane*, literally hermaphrodite, reflecting ambiguity about the sex or gender of the person being referred to. Also important here is Donham's note that *stabane* only referred to the "effeminate" partner in a male same-sex relationship. The implication is that two *stabane* did not have relations with each other. Although Donham is silent on the point, at the most this points to *stabane* as truly occupying a third category, and at the least it points to a very different cultural construction of homosexuality.

Prior to 1994, much of township sexuality in South Africa was conditioned by the strictures imposed by apartheid. We tend to think of that system as being largely a "simple" matter of racial segregation, but it was more. It focused on population control and the provision of cheap industrial labor, particularly in extractive industries. The male labor force was then housed in single-sex hostels. Although *stabane* may have been the appropriate term, and it may have had both connotations and denotations very different from Western concepts of sexuality, the distortions produced by apartheid obscured these differences, reducing them to little more than a variant of female impersonation and a specifically subordinate sexual role. However, Donham's analysis adds one other complication of theoretical significance. Although many people in the township, especially strangers, took gay people to be some sort of biologically mixed third sex, the people themselves did not seem to do so.

This phenomenon brings up the importance of the distinction between the cultural insider's view (emic) and the external observer's view (etic). Donham's analysis presents two emic constructions of the same sociocultural facts. In one, there is a sex–gender category beyond what we usually think of as the ordinary two, and in the other there is not.

The collapse of apartheid has led (or will lead) to changes in the cultural constructions of a local sex–gender–sexuality system, especially to the extent that the system of single-sex hostels disappears. Although he provides some caveats, Donham tends to see the process as a variety of "modernization" matching the "modernization"

of the sociocultural system that was apartheid. Given the artificial constraints created by apartheid, there is some justification in this approach. However, considering a bipolar homosexual–heterosexual paradigm as more modern than other paradigms tends to obscure the range of human variation. It also tends to gloss over the two discrepant views of sex–sexuality variations he describes. In a more “modern” context, similar discrepancies are reported by Kulick (1998) among *travestis* in Brazil.

Only Two Genders or More?

Murray (2000) tries to subsume all nonstandard non-heterosexual relationships under a model of three different types of homosexuality. The result is a shift of focus from sociocultural gender constructs to culturally mediated sexual activity. His entire book, which contains a wealth of carefully considered ethnographic material, is largely male oriented and organized around cultural definitions of who takes dominant or receptive positions. While some of his data fit that construct, his model, which denies the possibility of gender constructs beyond masculine and feminine, cannot deal with instances such as that noted by Jacobs and Cromwell (1992), while exploring the cultural construction of *kwidó*, a Tewa “third-gender” category, one of those positions that Williams (1992) would include under the general term *berdache*.

In the course of her fieldwork, Jacobs was told that a person could be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or trisexual. From the perspective of one of her male informants, homosexual meant that he had sex with other sociological men. Heterosexual meant that he had sex with sociological women, bisexual meant that he would have sex with either men or women, and trisexual would mean that he would have sex with men, women or *kwidó*. The logic of these statements is that someone, man or woman, who has sex with a *kwidó* is behaving in a heterosexual manner, even though *kwidó* are morphologically male.

A three- or four-gender system creates a more complex set of gender-based relationships than are contemplated by a system derived from Northern European and North American constructs. One of the complexities is the question of different emic understandings of a phenomenon (Segal, 1997). The problem is clearly marked by Jacobs and Cromwell’s material from the Tewa. In this case, Jacobs’ informant explained that the *kwidó* was not “gay,” despite the fact that some people called him that. Rather, the *kwidó* was made so by

“spiritual powers.” In addition, other informants, elders, informed Jacobs that proper socialization for *kwidó* included raising them “to be who they are” aided by the knowledge and experience of an adult *kwidó* (Jacobs and Cromwell, 1992, p. 56).

The Tewa in the southwestern United States are not the only people among whom more than one emic understanding of sex–gender–sexuality phenomena can be found. A strong case can be made for similar variation in the Society Islands, including Tahiti. In that setting, the person occupying a nonmasculine nonfeminine gender position is termed a *mahu*, and is often morphologically male. The data from Tahiti and the other Society Islands also raise a question about the relationship between sex–gender–sexuality systems as they existed prior to contact with European cultures (and conquest), and constructs as they are now found. Levy (1971, 1973) claims that only men were/are *mahu*. However, Elliston (1999) documents the existence of both morphological males and morphological females who take on the *mahu* status. In light of the relatively low level of gender dimorphism in the Society Islands, her projection that this was also probably the case in traditional (i.e., precolonial) times seems logical.

Here, it seems that a man’s sexual relations with a *mahu* are conceptualized (except by the *mahu*) as a replacement for relations with a woman. No one (except the *mahu*) seems to consider questions of sexual orientation (Levy, 1971, 1973). Among the Tewa, orientation seems to be an issue. Sex with a *kwidó* is a distinct cultural category and, Jacobs indicates, *kwidó* might have sex with other *kwidó*.

In both instances, we are confronted with a heterogeneity of emic understandings that is all too often glossed over in anthropological literature. Another difficulty is the veneer of Eurocentric ethnocentrism and homophobia created by the European colonial enterprise over a span of at least 200 years in most portions of the globe. In the instance of the Tewa, the major source has probably been an Anglo-Euro-American Protestantism. It is somewhat facile, but the shorthand reference to European colonialism and missionary activities fairly expresses the worldwide trends of which this is a part.

Where the *kwidó*’s origins in an encounter with superhuman forces granted an element of sacredness to his nature, that has been largely lost and concepts of a variety of sexual sins have become part of Tewa cognitions (Jacobs & Cromwell, 1992). On the other hand,

Jacobs' fieldwork is of relatively recent date, and the Tewa third gender seems to continue as a part of both beliefs and behaviors.

In contrast, the status *mahu*, as found in the Society Islands, does not seem to be as clearly delineated as a third gender in the definitive way that the *kwidó* seems to be marked among the Tewa. The largest part of the difficulty lies in the nature of the early sources, none of which took the people's perspectives into account, but the data that do exist are suggestive in a number of directions. By the latter half of the 20th century, when attention to emic perspectives had become more common, most of the world was in the throes of the sort of "modernization" noted by Donham (1998), although not as a result of so felicitous a process as the collapse of apartheid. The effects of colonial and mission cultures in shifting local cultural understandings of sex–gender systems have been pervasive, and sexuality has been a prime target.

Tahiti and the other Society Islands represent one type of tripolar sex–gender–sexuality system, in which there is only a single category beyond masculine and feminine, and that category is equally available to both women and men. The Society Islands are a region in which gender dimorphism is relatively light. People seem unconcerned about sharply marked gender distinctions (Elliston, 1999; Levy, 1973). This is exactly the social setting that seems most conducive to a sex–gender–sexuality system accommodating what Martin and Voorhies (1975) called supernumerary categories (Munroe & Whiting, 1969).

Mahu is not the only category or term currently found on the Society Islands. Of the terms now found, *mahu* has the longest history and might, in some frames of reference, be referred to as "traditional." There are other contemporary categories that explicitly link sexual behavior with gender, but *mahu* separates gender and sexuality in a way more complex than can be reviewed here.

Elliston's (1999) explication makes clear what may be a central question in the study of sex–gender–sexuality systems: In each particular culture, of sexuality and gender, which is perceived as producer and which as product? The very asking of the question points to the interaction of biology and culture, rather than to the primacy of one over the other. Elliston's analysis of sexual–gender categories in the Society Islands clarifies some of the apparent confusion. *Mahu* refers to the oldest layer, one in which experience and observed behavior

produce gender, which, in turn, directs people to their sexual partners, regardless of their morphology, that is, produces sexuality.

Other categories (*raerae*, *petea*, *lesbiennes*) refer to same-sex sexual relationships, coupled with coordinated gender behavior, and are conceived of as referring to categories of sexuality and gender derived from French colonial influence. However, the major difference seems to be that, for people assuming positioning within these categories, sexuality and gender behavior both exist within a performative foreground. In Elliston's experience *mahu* gender characteristics were part of the cultural foreground, and *mahu* sexuality was part of the cultural background. They were not culturally linked as a single ascribed unit.

CONCLUSION

By way of contrast, we might consider the way in which Western cultural constructs first place sex as the producer of sexuality, which then produces behavior. These two different visions of the relationship among sex, gender, and sexuality help us to understand both Western Christian religious difficulties with the sex–gender–sexuality systems of other parts of the world, as well as phenomena such as Zimbabwean, Kenyan, or Ugandan governmental fulminations that homosexuality is a foreign import. The foreign import is actually the cultural construct: sex leads to sexuality leads to behavior, along with the idea that only a portion of the possibilities is permitted.

Ultimately, reducing all sex–gender–sexuality systems to acceptance or rejection of homosexuality imposes a universal foreground, as well as a bipolar system that is consistent with the dichotomous thinking of most Western cultures. If we look at the Western system, which operates with two intersecting dichotomies (masculine–feminine and heterosexual [permitted]–homosexual [forbidden]), and the effort to change that model and the values and meanings attached to it, the desire to demonstrate the "acceptance" of homosexuality on the large cross-cultural canvas becomes understandable. But the distortion of complex sex–gender–sexuality systems in service to that aim does a disservice to the cultural integrity of many peoples and to their efforts to recapture traditional patterns that have often been suppressed.

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